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ABSTRACT

Research on facilitated communication (FC) is discussed, along with flaws in previous validation studies and suggestions for improving validation studies, including: testing first whether the person can do the task required under quiet, relaxed conditions; allowing the person to practice the skill until it can be used during the validation test; ensuring that the person facilitates with a variety of people; and including verbal peers for comparative purposes. The present validation research involved three different settings. First, examples are provided of natural validations occurring when individuals relayed information to staff, information that the staff had no way of knowing. Second, a facilitator helped students indicate which ingredient (unknown to the facilitator) they had each put into a cooking project. The ratios of correct facilitated and verbal answers for each of 10 students are presented. Third, a weekend activity checklist was completed by students, assisted by a facilitator, and accuracy of information was checked with the student's caregiver. The study concluded that FC cannot be discounted as a viable means for communication; however, more validation studies are needed. (SW)

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VALIDATING FACILITATION, NATURALLY!

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There appear to be many different interpretations of what constitutes Facilitated Communication (FC). For us, Facilitated Communication is a method where an individual, called a facilitator, provides tactile feedback to the person with autism, called the Facilitated Communicator (FCR). This feedback seems to allow the FCR the motor control necessary to communicate by pointing to pictures, words, a keyboard, etc. The tactile feedback can be provided in several different ways. The facilitator's hand is usually in contact with one of the following body parts of the FCR: hand; wrist; forearm; elbow; shoulder; or even hand touching shirt.

The tactile feedback is a means of support for the FCR, by holding the FCR's hand and providing resistance against the forward push toward the language stimuli. Under no circumstances should a facilitator ever guide the FCR's hand toward the language stimuli.

It seems interesting that since another person assists the FCR in communicating, many have considered all communications suspect. An example of this is the publicity generated when FC first became known, regarding abuse charges. Many professionals were quick to use the so-called high incidence of unfounded abuse charges brought by FCR's to prove that there was undue influence projected by the facilitating communicator.

However, none of these people ever mentioned the percentage of unfounded abuse charges generated by a similar verbal population. A professor from Indiana, who looked into it relayed (at the Council for Exceptional Children International Conference in 1994) that the percentage of unfounded abuse charges by verbal and FC individuals were almost identical!

Unfounded abuse claims are not the only negative publicity received by FC. Most of the currently published articles, dealing with validating FC, appear to suggest that there is indeed Facilitator influence and that the communications of the FCR may not be their own. However, there are questions about the validity of these validity studies.

In an article written by Arthur L. Schawlow, published in the Facilitated Communication Digest (November, 1989), Dr. Schawlow discusses some of the flaws in those validation studies. Mr. Schawlow, a Nobel Prize winner in physics, stated that these flaws are basically due to the fact that those conducting the studies failed to understand what was being tested. One of the basic problems with those published studies is that the person

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being "tested" is taken out of her or his natural environment and put in a test situation and then asked to perform. As Mr. Schawlow stated in his article, "...you must be careful to disturb the thing being measured as little as possible." Many non-verbal people are shy and demonstrate difficulty with the communication process. Yet, one of the validation studies showed a person four objects and then brought in the facilitator and asked the FCR to name the objects. "Finding names for objects is often not easy for many non-verbal people, although they can do better with practice in a relaxed setting."

Another study which showed facilitator influence showed different pictures to the FCR and the facilitator. If both people saw the same picture, the FCR inconsistently identified it correctly. But when different pictures were shown, the correct name was not typed. By showing different pictures, the person conducting the study muddied the waters, so to speak. This process distracted the facilitator who should be "paying attention to nothing but the movements of the hand being steadied, avoiding perseveration on one key....The facilitator needs to make sure that the person is concentrating on the task of communicating."

Mr. Schawlow goes on to discuss how a proper validation study should be set up. First, one must test whether the person can do the task required, under quiet relaxed conditions. Then, "that person should be allowed to practice that skill until it can be used during the validation test." Finally, there should be no distractions which would keep the facilitator from concentrating on the communication process.

Our validation study did just what Mr. Schawlow discussed above. We looked to validate FC in three different settings. One validation was when the FCR relayed information to staff that the staff had no way of knowing. When the FCR relays information that we at school do not know, we document the communication and then contact the family, or the person indicated in the communication, for verification. Some examples of the natural validations we have received follow:

1) LAR, a nine year old female student, was undergoing a speech and language evaluation. The speech-language pathologist was presenting the test items, while the classroom teacher was facilitating the student. At some point during the testing, LAR facilitated that she wanted to go back to the classroom because she did not feel well. When asked what hurt, LAR indicated the specific body part that was bothering her. This information was given to LAR's mother, who took LAR to the doctor. LAR was diagnosed with an infection in the area she had indicated through facilitation;

2) SYC, a seven year old female student, was participating in a ten day Auditory Integration Training (AIT) study. Although her behaviors during the ten day period could become difficult, one session in particular appeared to cause her to become more agitated than usual. SYC was returned to the classroom where the teacher (who had not been present at the AIT session) questioned her behavior. SYC facilitated "no music." At the same time, the psychologist who was conducting the AIT discovered that one of the headphone cords had come lose and SYC heard NO MUSIC;

3) MIK, a seven year old male student, was at a play museum with his class. MIK kept running away from the Junior High helper assigned to stay with him. A staff member got a keyboard and asked MIK why he kept running away. MIK facilitated "boat." There was a replica of a Viking boat in another of the rooms in the building. When MIK was asked if he wanted to play on the boat, he facilitated "yes." The Junior High helper brought MIK to the boat, and MIK no longer ran away from his helper!

Another validation project took place during a cooking class for one of our Multiple Needs classrooms (MN classrooms contain students diagnosed with severe ADD, ADHD, PDD, Autism, Etc.). This class was part of the classroom's normal weekly schedule from the beginning of the year. The teacher and speech-language pathologist (SLP) would set up all the ingredients to make the week's recipe. Communication was done during the cooking activity with a "stair step picture board" using Mayer-Johnson Pictures, and a Wolf/AAC device, programmed with the cooking vocabulary.

All students, verbal and non-verbal, were presented with a flash card with the Mayer-Johnson symbol and the written word. They were then told to find the ingredient located on a shelf in the room. Students located the ingredient by matching the picture symbol to the actual item and then brought it to the table and poured the ingredient into the bowl, etc. The classroom teacher was not in the room during this part of the activity. While the teacher remained out of the room, each student was asked, "what did you do to make the recipe?" Verbal students responded orally, and non-verbal students found the ingredient on the Wolf, either independently or through facilitation. One of the classroom assistants would record which ingredient each of the students used.

When the recipe was finished, the teacher came back into the room. The SLP and teacher seated all the students in a circle on a large rug. The SLP and teacher worked with the students to write a story about what they made, asking the students what ingredient they helped with. The teacher, who did not know what student put in which ingredient, facilitated those who needed FC. The SLP checked the answers supplied to the teacher with the actual recorded results. As each student answered verbally, pointed independently, or was facilitated, the SLP matched the pictures to the answers for inclusion into the story, on a large piece of paper. Below is the accuracy ratio for the students (number of weeks varies for the students due to absences):

SYC	Facilitation	9/10 correct
MIK	Facilitation	9/11 correct
MAM	Facilitation	11/11 correct
ADK	Facilitation & Verbalization	9/10 correct
MAR	Independent Pointing	10/10 correct
JOH	Verbal	10/10 correct
TRB	Verbal	8/10 correct
JOB	Verbal	7/11 correct
JOM	Verbal	7/9 correct
QUS	Verbal with Picture Cues	11/11 correct

The third validation setting was during a class that was designed specifically for this validation process. We began a Journal Class on Monday mornings, where all the students in the classroom would report two things they did over the weekend. Prior to the actual class, a note would go home with the students on the last day of class before the weekend, asking the caregiver (parent or guardian) to report what the student did over the weekend and return the note on Monday. We also asked the caregiver to discuss the weekend's activities with the students, to help minimize the impact of memory problems on the results. Letters with the weekend information were collected by the SLP, prior to any classroom staff seeing the information. During the Monday journal time, the recorder (usually the SLP) asked all the students in the class what they did over the weekend and recorded two things reported on a large poster. Verbal prompts were not given at this time, however all students had the option of looking at a choice board with approximately 90 activities on it. If the student did not respond, the recorder verbally prompted the student with a choice of three to four activities, two of which were reported by the caregiver. Even if no weekend letter was received, the reporter tried to prompt the student with a choice of items.

If the information supplied by the student did not match that supplied by the caregiver, a recheck note was sent home asking whether the reported activities also occurred. Based on the feedback from the original home note and the recheck note, data was then transferred to the Weekend Journal Checklist, detailing method of communication, type of alternative augmentative communication device used, accuracy, number and type of prompts, and any other comments. If the caregiver did not respond to either of the notes, that week's data was discarded. To be sure that this activity was one that the students could do and feel comfortable with, the process was followed for three weeks before actual data was counted. The study consisted of 24 students: 12 verbal, 11 non-verbal facilitators, and 1 non-verbal independent pointer. Below is a comparison of the data (in percentage accuracy) taken in October 1994 and March 1995.

October 1994						March 1995					
Facilitated		Verbal		Point		Facilitated		Verbal		Point	
JIS	70%	JOC	52%	MAR	0	*JIS	63%	JOC	69%	MAR	21
MIK	52	STN	75			MIK	50	STN	72		
MAM	70	LET	0			MAM	69	LET	50		
GAS	52	JOB	50			GAS	64	JOB	50		
SYC	66	JAS	38			SYC	72	JAS	63		
DAB	83	LIP	83			DAB	71	LIP	94		
MIC	50	BER	100			MIC	53	BER	83		
MIS	50	ROC	50			MIS	57	ROC	50		
TOB	83	JUF	50			TOB	78	JUF	73		
MIM	100	JEC	75			MIM	79	JEC	91		
ANG	50	MIN	50			ANG	55	MIN	80		
Average=60.5%		Average=60.25%				Average=64.6%		Average=72.33%			

* = this student began new medication in March, due to severe ear infections. As the infections progressed, his accuracy appeared to decrease.

Although there was a greater increase in the difference in percentages in March, they are less that ten percentage points.

Based on these results, and a comparison with most of the literature currently in print, there is a definite need for more validation studies of this type, conducted in the student's natural environment. When attempting to set up a validation study, there are a number of things to keep in mind:

1) obtain administrative support before setting up the study;
2) make certain that the student can do the task required;
3) the study should be conducted in as natural a setting as possible, not a test situation;
4) allow the person the opportunity to practice the task before data collection begins;
5) those in the study should be encouraged to facilitate with a variety of people (this is true for any time facilitated communication is occurring);
6) consider including verbal peers for comparative purposes (how do you know if the data is significant unless you have the verbal peers with which to compare!).

The importance of establishing validation studies in the FCR's natural environment is also evident when one reads Judith Felson Duchan's article, Issues Raised by Facilitated Communication for Theorizing and Research on Autism (JSHR, Vol. 36, 1108-1119, Dec. 1993). In this article she states that "an individual with autism may, with a good partner, and under the right circumstances, perform in highly competent ways. That same person under constrained, noncollaborative conditions may be severely impaired." She goes on to say,

> "those using FC are both competent and incompetent communicators, depending upon the support surrounding the communication interaction. They need much more support than most communicators, and are more susceptible to influence when that support is not forthcoming. They run the danger of being unduly distracted when facilitators are providing too much influence and of having difficulty communicating in contexts of nonsupport when their competence is being evaluated....The detailed study of naturally occurring communication interactions is commonplace in the study of language acquisition in children with and without disabilities.... (FC) is ripe for this sort of consideration....Rosemary Crossley, using the descriptive, naturalistic approach, has reported that of her 117 clients diagnosed as autistic, 91 (77.7%) were able to spell an intelligible sentence with FC by the end of three sessions....Thirty FC users in Australia have been able to type without physical support....and 9 in Syracuse....have been able to communicate when support is provided at the elbow."

In conclusion, more naturalistic studies need to be conducted on those using facilitated communication. It cannot be discounted as a viable means for communication, when many different professionals in many different states have seen that these people do

communicate novel information that the facilitator cannot know. Even if FC remains controversial, do we really have the right to remove the only successful means of communication these people have had?